

March 29, 2007

Madam Speaker, I rise today to introduce the “William H. Frist Gift of Life Congressional Medal Act” with my colleague, Mr. Camp of Michigan. This legislation creates a Congressional commemorative medal for organ donors and their families, recognizing the brave and selfless act of organ donation. It is an important piece of legislation that I hope will continue to receive bipartisan support. I also want to thank Senator Durbin (D-IL) and Senator Grassley (R-IA) for introducing the companion bill in the Senate.

Former Senate Majority Leader, and transplant surgeon, Dr. William H. Frist was a tireless advocate of organ donors and their families during his time in the Senate. Dr. Frist worked on behalf of the Gift of Life Congressional Medal Act for years, and I’m pleased to name the bill in his honor.

There is a serious shortage of available and suitable organs for donation. Nearly 100,000 people are currently waiting for organ transplants; over 2,000 of these are children under age 18. The national waiting list has grown substantially every year. Since the waiting list began, at least 75,000 donation-eligible Americans have died waiting for an organ to become available; in 2005 alone, over 6,000 people died for lack of a suitable organ. Donating an organ to someone whose life depends on it is laudable, and should be recognized and encouraged. The Gift of Life Congressional Medal Act is an important bill which would do just that.

Health and Human Services (HHS) has already implemented initiatives to raise the public awareness of this vital act of giving life. The Gift of Life Congressional Medal Act is a great opportunity for us to work with HHS to draw attention to this life-saving issue. It sends a clear message that donating one's organs is an act that should receive the profound respect of our nation.

The Gift of Life Congressional Medal Act establishes a nonprofit fund to be used to design, produce, and distribute a Congressional commemorative medal to organ donors or to a surviving family member. Enactment of this legislation would have no cost to the Federal Government. Startup costs are provided by the Treasury Department in the form of a loan, which would be fully repaid. Subsequently, the program would be self-sufficient through charitable donations.

This is non-controversial, non-partisan legislation to increase the rate of organ donation. I ask my colleagues to help bring an end to transplant waiting lists and recognize the enormous courage displayed by organ donors and their families. This bill honors these brave acts, while publicizing the critical need for increased organ donation. I urge swift passage of the William H. Frist Gift of Life Congressional Medal Act.